New York Theatre Critics' Reviews 1952

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**Asterisks indicate shows scheduled to play week of June 2, 1952*

Theatre Critics' Reviews brings you each week the complete reviews as they originally appeared in these New York newspapers.

NEW YORK JOURNAL-AMERICAN
NEW YORK DAILY NEWS
NEW YORK POST
NEW YORK MIRROR
NEW YORK WORLD TELEGRAM & THE SUN
NEW YORK HERALD TRIBUNE
NEW YORK TIMES

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"Sunday Breakfast"

The New York Times

May 30, 1952

'Sunday Breakfast,' Newest in ANTA Play Series, Staged Here by Stella Adler

By BROOKS ATKINSON

Since "Sunday Breakfast," produced by ANTA at the Coronet, is apprentice work by two authors new to Broadway, no one will be surprised to discover a certain breathless desperation in the writing. Emery Rubio and Miriam Balf have not mastered the craft of playwriting yet. But the imperfect workmanship does not frustrate the emotional values of what they are saying nor does it destroy the perceptiveness of their interest in people. "Sunday Breakfast" comes out of the New Dramatists' Workshop. ANTA is to be congratulated on taking an interest in the work of two promising authors.

Apparently Mr. Rubio and Miss Balf are saying: "Better a dinner of herbs where love is, than a stalled ox and hatred therewith." The Decker family, residing over a jewelry shop in a small Connecticut town, live at cross purposes and get on each other's nerves. After an evening of particularly bitter acrimony, they are shocked to discover that their 9-year-old daughter, Mary Jo, has run away. The state trooper who wearily returns her reminds the Deckers that they ought to try to get acquainted with their children. The Sunday breakfast of the title refers to the deliberate and thoroughly winning attempt they make to sit down around the table happily and surround Mary Jo with love.

* * *

Everything in the play that is pivoted on Mary Jo is genuinely touching, partly, no doubt, because Jada Rowland plays the role so simply. All child actors seem to be genuises nowadays. Perhaps because they are inexperienced, they have the knack of getting to the heart of the truth more directly than their elders. When little Miss Rowland turns a silent but hurt and accusing look straight at the other characters, she is the most powerful figure in the play. She is acting the truth with wounding frankness, whether she knows it or not.

The parts of the play that are not primarily concerned with Mary Jo are less successful. They not only portray nervousness in the characters; they are nervously written, a little frantic, changing emphasis and direction with an impulsiveness that leaves a theatregoer at loose ends. In these sequences Mr. Rubio and Miss Balf never stay in one place long enough to finish their thought. "Take it easy, chum," a sympathetic playgoer is likely to retort.

In these portions of the play Stella Adler's direction is also overwrought. Reversing the paternal advice of the fire laws, she makes the actors run where walking might be less distracting. There is enough busyness in the performance, as well as the script, for three or four plays about family life.

* * *

Everything takes place inside an intelligently planned setting by Ben Edwards, who has caught the disarrayed spiritual life of the Decker family. As the harassed father, Anthony Ross, always an impressive actor, gives an excellent performance—conveying under all the surface anxieties of the character a deep, warm hope for peace and affection. As the other members of a jangled family, Margaret Feury, Cloris Leachman and Douglas Watson give accurate, sharply outlined performances of rasping characters. If the performances seem thin and unfulfilled, the authors must share the blame. They veer off into side issues before they succeed in rounding out subordinate characters; and it is likely that the actors have very little material to take hold of.

And apart from Mary Jo and the father, the authors have concentrated less on the inner confusions of the family than on the shrill exterior. "Sunday Breakfast" does not have a solid foundation. But it works its way up to a particularly poignant situation that expresses one aspect of the truth about human beings. On that basis it is worth the interest ANTA has taken in it and the craftsmanlike work of the production.

"SUNDAY BREAKFAST"

Play by Emery Rubio and Miriam Balf; staged by Stella Adler; settings and costumes by Ben Edwards; presented by the American National Theatre and Academy at the Coronet Theatre, May 28, 1952. The cast:

Mary Jo Decker...Jada Rowland
Martha Decker..Margaret Feury
Anne Decker...Cloris Leachman
George Decker....Anthony Ross
Stanley Fredricks.....
Duncan Baldwin
Mike Decker....Douglas Watson
A State Trooper.....Jim Nolan

Journal-American

May 31, 1952

A Depressing Effort On Nearly All Counts

By JOHN McCLAIN

THE incessant wranglings in the home of a plodding New England jeweler provide the impetus for "Sunday Breakfast," the concluding offering of the American Theatre and Academy for 1952. The play opened at the Coronet Theatre the other night.

It is a depressing effort all around, dragging at times and then rising to such heights of screaming invective that, like the children in the family, many members of the audience must have felt an impulse to get rapidly away from it all. "Despair Under the Elms" would have been a more apt title.

This new drama by Emery Rubio and Miriam Balf tells of the tragedy visited on the family of Anthony Ross through his dedication to a faltering jewelry and repair shop located on the ground floor of their modest Connecticut apartment.

He works late and worries about the service he must render to his wealthy customers. This results in sheer agony all around.

His wife screams at him incessantly, his son has already blown the premises to escape to the peace and quiet of Pittsburgh, the grown daughter is finding sanctuary in going out every night with the town playboy, and even the youngest, an 8-year-old girl, manages to run away for a few hours when the going is too tough.

Then there is a brief interval when they all get together at Sunday breakfast, and the father promises to forget his dismal career and take a vacation. But at this moment the elder daughter decides to shove off overnight with her soiled Lochinvar, the old arguments come to life, and all hell breaks loose once more.

The old man winds up alone with his youngest, and one has the feeling that she will follow the audience out of the theatre the minute the curtain falls.

* * *

Honest Dialogue

DESPITE THE FACT that so much noisy unpleasantness about relative inconsequentials is questionable entertainment, the authors have exhibited an ability to write honest and sometimes moving dialogue. But with the exception of the little girl they never quite seem to make the characters believable.

Her credibility, the little girl's, is due in large measure of course to a great performance by a 9-year-old veteran named Jada Rowland, who has been around since she was a sprout of three.

When she is in charge the play assumes depth and importance. Cloris Leachman, always very decorative, was properly tough and practical as the older sister and Margaret Feury tried gallantly to be one of those implausibly hysterical mothers.

Anthony Ross made every effort to bring reality to the role of the bumbling, beleaguered father and there were many occasions, such as the breakfast scene, when he succeeded admirably. But a second later he would be cast back into the seething maelstrom of his domestic strife, where reactions were lost in the chorus of angry voices and the crash of broken cigar boxes.

I thought Ben Edwards' setting properly depicted a disarrayed small-town Connecticut flat, but it seemed that Stella Adler, the director, might have slowed the emoting of her principal characters. She had poor Ross shaking from the moment he came on stage until the very end. It makes a fellow nervous.

Daily Mirror

May 30, 1952

Short Play at the Coronet Seems Like Long One

By ROBERT COLEMAN

The American National Theatre and Academy offered a symphony in misery called "Sunday Breakfast" at the Cornet Theatre last evening. It's a mournful dirge about the depressing Decker family. Personally, we can't see why anyone should care to sit through such a harrowing, unrewarding and pointless shindy.

Papa Decker is a jeweler who spends most of his time polishing silver and selling cheap stuff. The profits are small. Mama Decker, a real shrew, resents the fact that she has to string pearls occasionally to help out. And she despises their bleak quarters above the shop. She thinks Papa Decker should get tough with his fancy customers, and let somebody else polish their silver.

Then the Decker son comes home, after wandering ineffectually around the country. He is so appalled by the family environment that he gets drunk and sneaks away. The eldest Decker daughter runs off with the town scoundrel, after the youngest has taken it on the lam and been brought back by a state trooper.

As the final curtain falls, Mama Decker is insulting Papa Decker, who, in tears, turns to his nine-year-old daughter for comfort, promising to take her on a fishing trip. A trip to Maine, just like the one he and Mama enjoyed before their marriage became a study in hatred.

The play takes its title from the third scene, in which the Decker family tries, without success, to arrange for a happier home life, just before it bursts wide apart. The years of bitterness have taken their toll. There is no turning back to a decent and workable understanding.

Anthony Ross, Cloris Leachman, Douglas Watson, Margaret Feury and Jada Rowland act the fighting Deckers with valiance and earnestness under the direction of Stella Adler. Duncan Baldwin and Jim Nolan do their best by other roles. But the under-written, sketchily motivated Emery Rubio-Miriam Balf script proves a Waterloo for even such capable players.

Ben Edwards has designed a drab setting and dowdy costumes, to catch the somber mood of the play.

Rubio and Miss Balf, it should be reported, write well every now and then. Their next work should be an improvement on the present one. In this instance, they have presented a dull family, have failed to make you sympathize with it, but rather loathe it. Frankly, we don't see why they or Robert Whitehead, managing director of ANTA, thought the general public would be interested in the Deckers.

"Sunday Breakfast" has one virtue. It is a short play. It just seems like a long one.

New York Post

June 1, 1952

By Richard Watts Jr.

Dismal Home Life of the Deckers

The authors of "Sunday Breakfast," the new play with which the American National Theater and Academy is ending its season at the Coronet, are under the mistaken impression that realism in the drama is enough, and that it must be very glum, indeed. Emery Rubio and Miriam Balf have written an intense and earnest work about a bitterly unhappy family, in which all the characters lead lives of noisy desperation, nerves and tempers are frayed, jagged and tortured, and the mutual hatred is thick with sullen recrimination. Save for a cruelly neglected child, there isn't a member of the household from whom one wouldn't flee in dismay.

This, of course, is not necessarily a condemnation of "Sunday Breakfast," and it must be said on behalf of its authors that they do their job of presenting their naturalistic detail with unsparing thoroughness, a feeling for actuality, and a stern determination to avoid showmanship or unseemly humor. George Decker and his horrible family are only too believable in their bored, embittered, sordid dullness and ineffectuality. What the playwrights do not appear to have recognized is that, having established the setting and characterization for a grim family tragedy, they should have written the tragedy to go with it.

Means and End

In a word or two, what they have given us is the beginning, not the ending, of a play. Their realism, whatever they may think, is a method and an approach, rather than an end in itself. As intensely as we may dislike the Deckers, we cannot deny their credibility as people and their availability as dramatic material. But it is not enough that they are presented to us large as life and twice as hateful. It was up to Mr. Rubio and Miss Balf to make their sullen tragedy somehow meaningful or significant, if only of the savage futility of life. Instead, they have simply set down a catalogue of unpleasantness.

The result is that the accumulation of misery on the stage, instead of being moving or pitiful or sardonic, is merely depressing in its dullness and unpleasant monotony. It is not that "Sunday Breakfast" is filled with ugly characters behaving abominably. It is not that it is about dull, annoying people. It is merely that the playwrights, apparently believing that realism is enough, have been content to let it go at that. They have failed to recognize the axiom that boredom, dullness and futility on the stage become merely dull, boring and futile unless they are enlivened by the process of creative imagination.

Matter of Detail

It is my impression that the two authors of "Sunday Breakfast" possess a talent for melancholy realistic detail. But only in one character, the neglected little daughter who runs away from home, and in one scene, where the Deckers make a brief, despairing effort to reclaim their miserable lives, do they succeed in the all-important business of taking their mass of naturalistic incident and transforming it into drama of genuine force, emotion and insight. For the rest of the time, they pile misery on misery and family quarrel on family quarrel without making them more than tiresome and a little embarrassing.

At least two of the performances strike me as exceptionally effective. A fine and intelligent child actress named Jada Rowland, as the unhappy daughter, and the always-expert Anthony Ross, as the ineffectual father, give portrayals of honesty and integrity which add to the play the creative imagination it otherwise lacks. Cloris Leachman as the older daughter and Douglas Watson as the son are also helpful, although Margaret Feury is somewhat baffled by the tiresome role of the complaining mother. "Sunday Breakfast" depressed me so much that it is probably a good thing I am going to get away from it all in Europe for a while.

DAILY NEWS

May 30, 1952

'Sunday Breakfast' Is an Earnest But Rather Aimless Little Drama

By JOHN CHAPMAN

Many years ago Carson Robison made a song, "Life Gets Teejus," about the hens quit layin' and the fish quit bitin' and too much bathin' will weaken yuh. The last line of this Dostoievskian classic is, "Life gets tasteless, don't it?" Without music, this is the motif of "Sunday Breakfast," which the American National Theatre and Academy is presenting at the Coronet Theatre as the final production of Broadway's 1951-52 season.

A Happy Household.

"Sunday Breakfast," by Emery Rubio and Miriam Balf, is an earnest play and it is earnestly acted, but I fear its being is of little importance. No matter how much pity and affection the authors may have had for their characters, little of these sentiments was transmitted across the footlights to me last evening. I merely thought that the authors' Decker family were a bunch of quarrelsome and sniveling bores.

Anthony Ross, a good actor, plays the so-called head of this tribe. He runs a little jewelry shop in a small Connecticut town, lives upstairs, and whenever he has nothing else to do—which is seldom—he polishes silver. His wife, played by Margaret Feury, is what the early Yankees used to call a common scold—the kind who should be ducked, regularly, in a pond. His first daughter (Cloris Leachman) is a sexy lass who goes out with the wrong fellows. His son (Douglas Watson) is a misfit who can't hold a job because he wants to play the piano. His young daughter, nicely played by Jada Rowland, is an eight-year-old who is the main figure of the play.

Trooper Stubs Toe.

This child is a cheerful little soul who is always willing to help set the table or bring out the ironing board, but she gets fed up with family quarrels and runs away. Pretty soon a Connecticut state trooper brings her home. This is a mistake, for if I were advising this little girl I'd tell her to go on the bum and never come home.

The writing and acting of "Sunday Breakfast" aren't bad, but I can't see any point to the play. When it's all over Mr. Ross tells little Miss Rowland, who is the most self-possessed actress since Tallulah Bankhead, that he is going to take her fishing in Maine. I bet she doesn't like fish.

NEW YORK Herald Tribune

May 30, 1952

'Sunday Breakfast'

By WALTER F. KERR

"Sunday Breakfast," the American National Theater and Academy's final offering of the season, is a play filled with small home truths and a great deal of grinding anguish. Its most appealing figure is a six-year-old tot who is barked at, slapped at, deprived of her pet music box, and ignored when she wants to display her new party dress. Halfway through the evening at the Coronet she bolts into the night, and I'm afraid I found myself hoping she'd make good her getaway.

Authors Emery Rubio and Miriam Balf are concerned with the petty irritations, the intolerable nagging, which can turn a commonplace home into a hotbed of mayhem. And they have an accurate ear for the spiteful give-and-take of ordinary people, a photographic eye for the drab, edgy and monotonous movements of empty middle-class life.

But simple accuracy is never enough. Perception, understanding, and profound sympathy are necessary if such spare agony, such unrelieved frustration, is to prove tolerable and finally rewarding in the theater. The ill-humors of "Sunday Breakfast" are so plainly set down, so little filled out with any kind of gratifying or endearing contrast, that they come to have the overemphasis of a penny-dreadful and even, on occasion, the stylized outlines of a comic strip—a comic strip in which papa throttles mama.

The Decker family live over their jewelry repair shop in a small Connecticut town. Father is a nervous, ineffectual man who can neither make a go of his modest business nor ever stop worrying about it. Mother is a virago who takes out her own disappointment with life on whichever member of the family is closest to hand.

Daughter is reduced to dating the town rake, son is unable to hold a job and given to drinking off his failures, and the six-year-old must put up with them all.

When the confused youngster runs out on her bickering elders, she is returned by a philosophical State Trooper. It is his homely notion that if the Deckers will sit down to a Sunday breakfast together, read the funnies, and perhaps really listen to one another for a change, all will be well.

Father makes a heroic effort to pull his brood together. He turns up bright and early next morning with a dozen sugar rolls and the Sunday papers, ready to imitate all the familiar gestures of domestic felicity. And it is here that the play becomes genuinely, if only briefly, touching.

Anthony Ross plays the paternal Decker, and he has found a very sensitive balance between the man's fundamental kindliness and his exasperating impotence, his utter inability to bring off anything he has hopefully begun. While he is urging his family to forced gayety around the piano, or trying to interest them in his reminiscences of a fishing trip he has taken sixteen years before, he is a moving figure.

But you know that the era of good feeling cannot last, the authors have made all too obvious what they have in mind, and you are neither surprised nor emotionally shattered when the next nervous flareup arrives precisely on schedule.

Some of the patness which dogs "Sunday Breakfast" in performance must be laid to Stella Adler's painstakingly paced direction. Though Miss Adler achieves an occasional effective mood, she has started her performances off at an overwrought and altogether premature tension, she overloads them with what are meant to be pregnant pauses, and she is sometimes busy accenting what is already patent in the script.

She has, in addition, got a pretty trying performance from Margaret Feury as the relentlessly snappish mother. Miss Feury bares her teeth in simulated desperation and charges about the stage with a gimlet-eyed drive, but she never makes the woman more than a cartoon and she often robs a scene of its beginning pathos.

Cloris Leachman and Douglas Watson, as wayward daughter and wayward son, turn in direct, thoughtful and thoroughly able jobs. But neither part ever builds to a rewarding scene, and two conscientious young actors are confined to rather dry vignettes.

Jada Rowland's disenchanted little runaway is a remarkably intelligent and understanding bit of work. Her transition from a normally bright and winning child to a suddenly silent and sullen member of this graceless family is beautifully accomplished and, together with Mr. Ross, she runs off with the honors of the evening.

Listening to "Sunday Breakfast" is a lot like catching snatches of conversation from that badmannered bunch who live next door. The wrangling is all very real, but it tends to become a neighborhood joke rather than the stuff of tragedy.

New York World-Telegram and The ~~Evening~~ Sun

May 31, 1952

'Breakfast' at The Coronet

By WILLIAM HAWKINS.

"Sunday Breakfast" may not be the worst play of the season, but it is easily the most unpleasant.

This week belongs to the school of writing which believes that straight reporting of facts or conditions is worthwhile theatrical fare simply because they exist.

In this case the evening is devoted to a visit with as nagging, dreary and disagreeable a family as ever gathered under one roof.

A Wise Fugitive.

Father is an undistinguished jeweler, who lives over his shop and ekes out a living polishing flat silver and getting his wife to string costumers' pearls.

Mother is a psychotic scold, egotistical and complaining. The son wanders from job to job listlessly, and the daughter is playing bait for some well-known wolves.

The only pleasant person in the play is a child of 8, who quite wisely spends most of her time running away.

Every once in a while there is a suggestion of quality about the play, but it is performed so jerkily and with such unexplained and unprepared transitions, that the result is like an early rehearsal.

An Unconvincing Incident.

The title refers to one meal when the whole family is together. Father squirts grapefruit into his eye, and sets them all laughing. For a little while they recall the past with pleasure and plan for the future.

This episode is entered into, and then deserted, with such abruptness that it is unconvincing.

At the close the father is left hysterically assuring his little daughter that they will go fishing in Maine. One would guess this treat was just about enough to drive the youngster to suicide.

No Hurry.

The play is filled with inconsistencies, such as the moment when a customer calls on Sunday morning to pick up a string of pearls, then immediately insists that there is no hurry for them, and they can be delivered the next day.

Cloris Leachman has some effective passages in the first act when she is rushing off to meet her boy friends. The others are pretty much at a loss to do anything with their roles, except perhaps little Jada Rowland as the youngster, who cannot help garnering what little sympathy is going.

"First Lady"

Daily Mirror

May 29, 1952

'First Lady' Is Hilarious Satire on Politics

By ROBERT COLEMAN

The New York City Theatre Company got back in stride last evening with a highly entertaining revival of "First Lady." It was fitting that the City Center theatre group should end its Spring comedy season with such a sparkling and timely show as this. This makes it two clicks out of three chances on our score sheet.

We have liked "The Male Animal" and "First Lady," while turning thumbs down on "Tovarich." The latter impressed us as being staged with a baseball bat. David Alexander has directed "First Lady" with an electric mixer. The result is a smooth blend of excellent talents. Two out of three, by the way, is a terrific batting average for this season. Supervisor George Schaefer is entitled to a bow.

The Katharine Dayton-George S. Kaufman comedy is a gay and diverting frolic. It is what might be called a well-made play. An experienced aisle-sitter can call the shots. But it is really something to get so amusing and observant a piece in these days. We have used the term "well-made play" appreciatively. It's good to sample first-rate craftsmanship again.

After a lengthy absence in Hollywood and Washington, Helen Gahagan Douglas has returned to give us a dynamic and engaging performance as the wily wife who almost maneuvers her diplomat husband out of a Presidential nomination. But it is Edna Best who really runs away with the laugh honors as the amorous and temperamental spouse of a stuffy, aged Supreme Court Justice.

The acting duel between Mrs. Douglas and Miss Best is a corker. It is wonderful to see two actresses who know their business superlatively well go to work with such rewarding results. They capitalize handsomely on their contrasting roles. Frederic Tozere's dyspeptic Justice and resentful husband is a gem and Ruth McDevitt is perfect as a frumpy, sincere, bumbling clubwoman.

Other top-flighters in the outstanding cast are Peggy Ann Garner, Scott McKay, Howard Wierum, Ona Munson, Guy Spaull, Margery Maude, Regina Wallace and Addison Richards. Only lack of space prevents our mentioning many other capables in the large company. Peter Larkin and Noel Taylor have designed attractive settings and costumes.

It will be a long time, we suspect, before you see so many "names" in a single cast again.

"First Lady" is a sharply satiric commentary on the Washington drawing-rooms where Presidents are chosen. It set the pattern for others of its kind. It remains an admirable example for those who would pen political comedies. And it offers an evening of literate hilarity. It's gorgeous fun. Don't miss it.

"FIRST LADY"

Comedy by Katharine Dayton and George S. Kaufman; staged by David Alexander; scenery by Peter Larkin; costumes by Noel Taylor; presented by the New York City Theatre Company (George Schaefer, artistic director) at New York City Center, May 28, 1952.

The cast:

Sophy Prescott.....Ona Munson
Charles.....Frank Rowan
Emmy Paige..Peggy Ann Garner
Lucy Chase Wayne.....
Helen Gahagan
Stephen Wayne.....Guy Spaull
Belle Hardwick..Margery Maude
Mrs. Ives.....Regina Wallace
Ann Forrester...Althea Murphy
A Congressman's Wife.....
Genevieve Frizzell
Her Friend.....Darthy Hinkley
The Baroness....Ulla Kazanova
Senor Ortega.....Luis Martinez
A Chinese.....Norman Chi
A General.....Leonard Lord
Young Girl.....Jean Jordan
Lal Kham...Richard D. Warner
Mrs. Creevey....Ruth McDevitt
Mrs. Davenport.....Bette Ford
Senator Keane.....Scott McKay
Tom Hardwick.....
Addison Richards
Irene Hibbard.....Edna Best
Bleecker.....Hal Cooper
Carter Hibbard.....
Frederic Tozere
George Mason....Will Hussung
Ellsworth T. Ganning.....
Howard Wierum
Jason Fleming.....
Richard Hamilton
Herbert Sedgwick.....
Richard Sterling

NEW YORK Herald Tribune
May 29, 1952

'First Lady'

By WALTER F. KERR

"FIRST Lady," which is mostly a battle of insults between a couple of sharpshooting Washington hostesses, comes as a timely choice for City Center's concluding bill of the season, and it serves quite nicely as a parade ground for several stylish and winning performers.

Helen Gahagan, back in the theater after three terms in Congress, is obviously enjoying the change. She goes at the role of Lucy Chase Wayne, wife to a Secretary of State who is likely Presidential timber, with spirit and relish—arching a handsome eyebrow, getting a knowing gleam in her eye as she envisions fresh female skulduggery, and taking a final and satanic satisfaction in the success with which she maneuvers her man.

I doubt that Edna Best has ever been in better form than she is as Miss Gahagan's arch-rival. There is deadly, and downright exhilarating, venom in her delivery of the play's best barbs, and she manages a couple of delightfully funny pantomime moments: one in which she silently compares her husband with an enormous fish which hangs on the wall, another in which she dazedly adapts herself to the fact that this stupefying bore may himself be Presidential material, and a third, toward the end of the play, in which she acknowledges defeat with a splendidly poisonous grimace.

The play itself—seventeen years old now—has not worn so well as its perennially attractive stars. It is an unconscionably long time getting under way, ladling out enough exposition to take care of three fairly complicated comedies, and it runs afoul of some pretty straight-faced plot mechanics in its latter portions. There is, too, an awkwardly broad tone to a good bit of the incidental satire. Labeling a woman's political group the Peace, Purity, and Patriotism League, or a radio program the Whoops Family, has a slightly sophomoric ring to it these days, and "First Lady" does not always glitter as brightly as the people who play it.

But the very large cast—twenty-seven characters drift through Peter Larkin's suitably elegant setting at one time or another—is an excellent one. Frederic Tozere has a lot of fun as the stuffy legislator who relaxes with detective stories and radio serials, and his uncontrollable shudder as he receives an unwanted kiss from his wife is one of the evening's happiest images.

Ona Munson is on hand as Lucy Wayne's wryly patient personal secretary, Guy Spaull makes an amiable and manageable Secretary of State, Peggy Ann Garner seems to be getting prettier all the time, and Ruth McDevitt bumbles beautifully through the brief role of a matronly kingmaker. I also liked the rather strange and stylized invention which Howard Weirum brings to his professionally homespun newspaper tycoon. And Scott McKay and Addison Richards are a great help on the sidelines.

I doubt very much that "First Lady" would carry its own weight as a regular commercial attraction nowadays, but it's an agreeable diversion for City Center fans and it is acted with blithe and becoming buoyance.

Journal American
May 29, 1952

The Humor Is Dated But It's Still Pleasant

By JOHN McCLAIN

ANOTHER revival, this one the final offering of the City Center Theatre Company for the current season, was launched for a limited run at their ample auditorium last night. The name: "First Lady"; the authors: Katharine Dayton and George S. Kaufman.

This drama saw footlights first in 1935, and ran successfully with Jane Cowl in the star spot. Helen Gahagan played that part last night, sharing billing with Edna Best, Ona Munson, Peggy Ann Garner, Frederic Tozere and Scott McKay.

Once again, it seemed to me, time had extracted a rather heavy toll from the property. It is a comedy involving Washington hostesses, Senators, and diplomats, and many of the jokes and situations creak slightly at the joints.

So much of the same stuff has been written since that even though it may have been bright and hilarious 17 years ago it is slightly old sombrero today. We didn't know much about inside Washington society in 1935; now we're bored to death with it.

• • •

Funny Lines

AND WE'RE NO longer greatly amused, if we ever were, with the peculiarities of parliamentary language. It is not exactly side-splitting that Peggy Ann Garner cannot understand why there is no actual table when a resolution is "tabled," although there IS a chair when the Vice-President "takes" it.

But despite all this there are still funny lines here and there and one distinctly rewarding scene, the first in the second act, which would be a proud part of anyone's play. This is Edna Best at her very best, and there is nobody around who can do more with a line or a look.

There also is a bright characterization of a Helen Hokinson type club women by Ruth McDevitt, and several sprightly bits by Howard Wierum, as a demonstrative newspaper publisher.

As the wife of the Secretary of State, the predominant character, I thought Helen Gahagan might have been slightly less strident, relying more upon the subtelties of voice and gesture to carry the key scenes.

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Direction Fine

DAVID ALEXANDER, who directed "Pal Joey," peformed the same chore for "First Lady" and managed to move the cast about the great open spaces of the Center Theatre without loss of timing, yet succeeding during the more intimate moments in shrinking the stage to the proper proportions.

He was assisted in this latter endeavor by Peter Larkin, who designed the sets, and furnish two highly practical and effective backgrounds, especially the one in the second act in which Miss Best and Frederic Tozere enjoyed their most remunerative moments.

This is not the best effort of the City Center for the season, but it is still well above the average "pasta fazool" that has been dished up elsewhere during the same period. Excepting a dreary and interminable first act you'll have a passably pleasant evening in the theatre.

The New York Times

May 29, 1952

Helen Gahagan and Edna Best Appear in 'First Lady' at the City Center

By BROOKS ATKINSON

George Gershwin had written a roaring score for "First Lady," as he did for "Of Thee I Sing," the comedy Katharine Dayton and George S. Kaufman wrote in 1935 would be more exhilarating today. The jokes about Washington still pop out of the script in the production put on at the City Center last evening, and there is some funny satire of married life, suitable for any modern profession. But the formula for "First Lady" seems obsolete now and the satire does not touch on the foibles of today. This is the least diverting of the Center's spring gambols.

Since it is acted with considerable dash and relish by several versatile actors there is obviously some actable material in the script. Although Helen Gahagan has not been acting in New York since 1936 she has kept in practice in Washington, where she has served as a legally certified Congresswoman. As the first lady of the comedy she is giving an exuberant performance in a broad style that keeps the plot leaping across the stage. She is bold, hearty and restless, and she speaks vigorously enough to be heard across the footlights; and she is as handsome as she was when New York knew her better. Congress has kept her vitality at concert pitch, sharpened her wit and improved the authority of her attack.

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Thanks largely to Edna Best's vitriolic style of acting, the library scene between the associate justice and his wife after dinner is the most entertaining scene in the current production. Frederic Tozere is amusing as the caricature of a justice—peevish, fussy and feebly pompous. But Miss Best's restless hatefulness, her impatient wriggling in a chair, her glares of distaste and disgust and her acid tongue pack this scene with very intelligible skullduggery and make it the high point of the play.

Under David Alexander's racy direction, there are a number of idiomatic performances in a spirit of caricature. As an amorous Senator and a Mississippi belle, Scott McKay and Peggy Ann Garner contribute an especially enjoyable mating scene, strutting, backing and filling in a formal drawing room. Howard Wierum as a fatuous newspaper publisher, Ruth McDevitt as a professional woman's club leader and Margery Maude as a veteran Washington wife pitch into their parts with a lot of humor.

It is good to have Ona Munson back in town, looking very cheerful; but there is no disguising the fact that her part as a secretary is the most monotonous in the play. And Guy Spaull is perfectly cast, though his talents are largely wasted in the perfunctory part of the Secretary of State.

That, in fact, is the chief infirmity of a popular comedy like "First Lady." The formula is so rigid that it wastes time on characters, and a certain part of the plot is inevitably routine. When the satire is timely or when the public mood is receptive, the routine passages do not matter much. But they are the parts that age most rapidly, and they begin to spread all through the play. Despite the lively acting and some malicious humor about people in Washington, "First Lady" looks tired today. There are better topics for satire among our contemporary demagogues.

New York Post

May 29, 1952

By Richard Watts Jr.

The Stage's Political Nostalgia

It may be indicative of the current state of the national mind that the theater seems to be increasingly nostalgic about the American politics of an earlier and more simple era. First there was "Of Thee I Sing," which sang of a time when Presidential elections were as simple as corn muffins, and now there is "First Lady," the 1935 comedy by Katharine Dayton and George S. Kaufman, which was revived last night at the City Center and tells ruefully about the good old days when nominations for the Presidency were won and lost in cat fights among Washington matrons.

There is possibly something comforting about these gay little theatrical meditations on the political scene in the years of our lost innocence, but I must say that last night's comedy, for all its carefree and folksy attitude toward the statesmen and their domestic problems, struck me as being thin, mechanical and far from continuously entertaining. There were some amusing episodes when Edna Best was in evidence as a particularly reprehensible lady schemer and Frederic Tozere was present as a doddering jurist with a rumbling of Presidential ambition, but "First Lady" took a long time to pass any given point.

At the time it was written, it was whispered that "First Lady" was vaguely based on a once-famous social struggle between two ladies named Alice Longworth and Dolly Gann. Both of them were certainly celebrated at that period, Mrs. Longworth being the daughter of Theodore Roosevelt, but the chances are that their quarrel is not of the most topical interest today; and, to hold the attention, the comedy must make up for that lack by the wit, humor and general entertainment value of its comic invention. And my impression is that it is considerably too lax in its striving for festivity.

It also seemed to me that the way in which its heroine, who is here the granddaughter of an ex-President, finally routs her rival, was a little too complicated to be interesting or amusing. It had something or other to do with a treaty with some mythical country in Eastern Europe which revealed, in time for the final curtain, that Miss Best wasn't divorced from her Balkan prince and, therefore, her marriage to the doddering Presidential aspirant wasn't legal. I thought it was a remarkably obscure and complex plot device, and it didn't add at all to the pleasures of an in-and-out evening.

Furthermore, I must say that I found the catty menace, played by Miss Best, not only more entertaining but more engaging than the wise and triumphant heroine portrayed by Helen Gahagan. Miss Gahagan, who was a successful actress before she became a congresswoman from California, is a handsome and distinguished personage, who still knows her way around a stage, and she is certainly type-cast for the part of a Washington matron with political interests, but she does lack the expertness at handling a comedy line that Miss Best possesses to abundance. The result was that the villainess managed to dominate the narrative.

I enjoyed Mr. Tozere, who is not always a favorite actor of mine, as the ancient jurist with an interest in both the presidency and comic strips, and there are pleasant performances by Ona Munson, Peggy Ann Garner, Scott McKay, Guy Spaull and a lot of other competent actors playing assorted ladies and gentlemen of Washington society and politics. I wonder, though, if it isn't possibly a compliment to most actors to say that they have a bit of trouble impersonating big-shot politicians convincingly. The only modernizations I noted were references to Betty Grable and some of the characters in "Dick Tracy," and I didn't think they helped "First Lady" seem notably refreshing.